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THE FRENCH-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP

A warm and close French-Israeli relationship dates from the mid-1950s, when France decided to become the major supplier of arms to Israel. It was strengthened by the Suez campaign and has since been maintained by the military establishments of the two countries, despite some attempts by De Gaulle in 1958 and 1959 to achieve a rapprochement with the Arab states. Delivery of modern aircraft and other arms continued in 1960, and it may be that the nuclear reactor complex at Beersheba, on which France has been giving assistance, is intended for weapons-grade plutonium production.

Postwar Relations

For the first five years after Israel's creation, French-Israeli relations were not particularly close, although friendship was fostered by mutual anti-German sentiment and by sympathy in some French intellectual circles for Israel's struggle to establish itself firmly as a nation. There were also political ties between the French Socialist party and Israeli Socialists--partially a legacy of pro-Zionist French Premier Leon Blum. Following the Egyptian revolution in 1952 and Nasir's complete takeover in 1954, some Frenchmen began to view Israel as a counter to Egyptian influence and a new base from which to recoup the influence France had lost in the Middle East when Syria and Lebanon became completely independent after World War II.

In March 1953
Pierre Gilbert arrived in Tel Aviv as French ambassador, and set about to

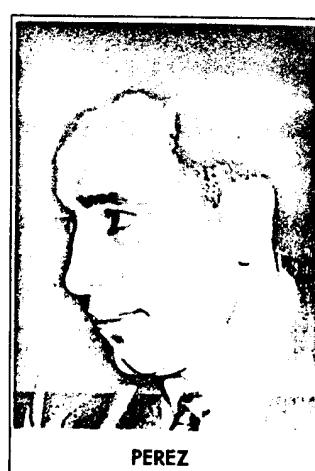
make France Israel's major supplier of arms. To this end, he sent the director general of the Israeli Defense Ministry, Shimon Peres, to talk with influential persons in France. Peres found the French Government divided between the views of traditional Middle East experts, who favored continuing friendly relations with the Arabs, and those who leaned to Israel as an ally against a hostile Nasir.

This difference of opinion was resolved in favor of Israel, partly as a result of Gilbert's efforts and partly because of the disclosure in October 1955 that Cairo had bought arms from the Soviet bloc. In the six months preceding the Sinai campaign France poured 40,000 tons of military equipment into Israel. This action and the subsequent close military collaboration in the Suez campaign solidified French-Israeli friendship, and there followed in 1957 and 1958 a stream of French visitors to Israel, including cabinet ministers, influential deputies, civic leaders, financiers, and industrialists.

Another factor in this friendship was the appeal a strong Israel held out to



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advocates of a French Algeria as a means of curbing Arab abilities to help the Algerian rebels. Jacques Soustelle, leading a French parliamentary delegation to Israel in 1957, said France and Israel had parallel interests in "mastering the problems created by North Africa and Middle East disturbances." He is a past president of the French-Israeli friendship society in France and maintains ties with the Israeli rightist party Herut.

Relations Under De Gaulle

When De Gaulle came to power in June 1958, a reassessment of France's policy toward Israel seemed in prospect. Foreign Minister Couve de Murville told British officials that France henceforth would be much less ostentatious in its friendship with Israel. De Gaulle, preoccupied with Algeria, was reliably reported in July 1958 to feel that time was running against the West in combating Arab nationalism and that the West must eventually come to terms with the Arabs.

In May 1959 French and UAR representatives secretly negotiated in Geneva a financial and commercial agreement aimed at restoring the pre-Suez relationship between their countries. Paris also took soundings for a resumption of diplomatic relations, proposing, according to a Cairo source, to reduce cooperation with Israel in return for a reduction of Egyptian support of the Algerian rebels.

A French Foreign Ministry representative in Cairo told a US official in late 1959 that while France would fulfill its existing contracts with Israel, Paris had not been responsive to recent Israeli requests for additional arms. He said that if France did accede to further such requests, it was prepared to treat the UAR on the same basis and the UAR had been so advised.

The Israelis have worked hard to counter any desire of De Gaulle's government to adopt a less friendly policy. Foreign Minister Golda Meir argued to De Gaulle in August 1958 that the West should work with its only two allies in the Middle East, Turkey and Israel. Mrs. Meir later reported to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion that De Gaulle was cordial and sympathetic, but noncommittal.

In the spring of 1960, intimates of De Gaulle reportedly told Dr. Nahum Goldmann, head of the World Zionist Organization, to warn Israel that France could not always be a major source of arms. They said De Gaulle had been confronted with serious differences in the French Government on the question of a continued supply of arms to Israel. De Gaulle decided to make no change for a year. Thereafter if the West were to decide to secure Israel's future, the West as a whole should share the onus of Arab hostility for arming Israel.

When Ben-Gurion personally tried to impress De Gaulle in June 1960 with the rapidity with which the UAR was upsetting the arms balance between Israel and the Arab states, De Gaulle would make no specific commitments. He said, however, that France would continue as a source of arms.

Military Ties Remain Close

The high-level "cooling off" in French-Israeli relations does not seem to have affected the close military ties cemented by cooperation in the Suez incident. A French Foreign Ministry official conceded in August 1958 that relations in the military field remained extremely close, and that even the working level at the Foreign Ministry did not know exactly what form of agreement existed between the services of the two countries.

An Israeli Foreign Ministry official admitted that military ties with France continued to be such an important aspect of Israel's thinking that Israeli defense personnel considered all Israeli-French relations basically within their province, "a circumstance of some dis-taste and embarrassment to the foreign minister." Mrs. Meir was even on the point of resigning in September 1959 over interference in foreign affairs by the Ministry of Defense.

In practical terms the relationship is apparent on various military levels. In July 1958 France and Israel agreed that military service requirements of either country could be satisfied by a tour of duty with the army of the other. Israeli pilots continued training in France, and French technical military teams and instructors remained in Israel. During 1959 and 1960 there were frequent and extended visits of key Israeli military officers to France. Israeli submarine crews were reported training in France, and Israeli naval units engaged in March 1960 in joint antisubmarine warfare exercises with the French.

The Israelis maintain their secret arms-purchasing mission in Paris completely independent of the diplomatic mission. In February 1960 Jean Bourdeillette, Gilbert's successor as ambassador to Tel Aviv, confirmed that the French military attaché in Israel was much more intimately connected with the Israeli Army than is usual for an attaché.

Particularly significant is the continuance of French military shipments to Israel. In the spring of 1960, a total of 30 Super Mystere jet aircraft were delivered. In March 1960 a well-placed French source said that six months earlier Israel had placed an order with the French for 60 ultramodern Mirage-III jet

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fighters, with delivery to begin in September 1960 and continue through 1962.

The Atomic Energy Agreement

A French-Israeli agreement for cooperation in nuclear energy has been known to exist since 1953 but has never been published. During the period 1952-59, there were rumors that French assistance to Israel in the nuclear energy field included aid in the development of nuclear weapons. On 15 April 1958, however, Dr. Ernst Bergmann, chairman of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, stated categorically that the agreement was limited to the exchange of information on uranium chemistry and the production of heavy water. He claimed that press reports of French-Israeli cooperation to build an atomic bomb were fabrications designed to influence the US not to aid the French nuclear weapons program.

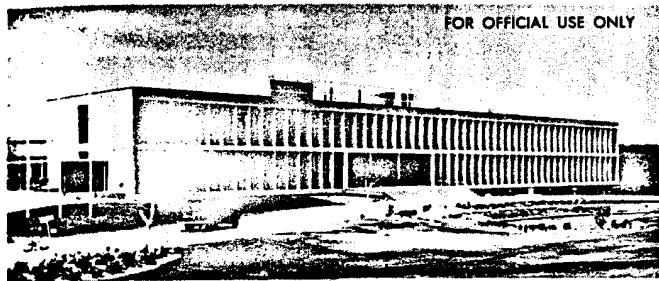
On 7 December 1960, the US Joint Atomic Energy Intelligence Committee issued a statement that a nuclear reactor complex under construction in the Negev near Beersheba could be interpreted to have a number of possible functions, including research, plutonium production, and/or nuclear electric power generation. The secrecy surrounding the project suggests that the complex is intended for the production of weapons-grade plutonium, whether or not generation of electric power is involved. There is extensive evidence that France is supplying plans, materials, equipment, and technical assistance and is also training Israeli personnel.

On 22 November 1960, an official of the French Atomic Energy Commission denied both French official and industrial collaboration with Israel in such a project and described the French-Israeli agreement as relating to uranium and heavy-water production. Following

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press reports in mid-December that Israel was well on the way to building its first experimental nuclear bomb, Paris issued a statement on 19 December denying any assistance in



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an Israeli military nuclear program.

The French announcement added that the assistance furnished by France to the Israeli program concerned a heavy-water, natural-uranium reactor, and that all necessary provision had been made to assure utilization of the installation for exclusively peaceful purposes. On 21 December, in reply to a question in the Israeli parliament, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion stated that Israel was building a 24-megawatt research reactor in the Negev, but he made no mention of French assistance. Since even a research reactor of that capacity can produce some weapons-grade plutonium, the disposition of the irradiated fuel elements is of major importance. In view of Israel's limited uranium metal capability, it is believed that France is also assisting in the supply of the necessary reactor fuel.

The evidence which suggests direct French aid includes the following items:

(1) [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] in mid-1957 reported that France had been given Israeli patents on a heavy-water separation process as part

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payment for French military assistance during the Suez campaign.

(2) According to [REDACTED] in December 1960, France sold Israel blueprints of the French G-3 reactor at Marcoule in 1957.

(3) In September 1957 [REDACTED]

said that the then French premier, Bourges-Maunoury, and the French army chief of staff had decided that France would furnish "complete information concerning atomic energy" to aid Israel in constructing an atomic bomb. [REDACTED] claimed that the agreement was not discussed in the cabinet but was worked out by the premier's and defense minister's staffs.

(4) [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] said in Tel Aviv in 1958 that France would be willing to supply Israel with uranium.

(5) France also has generally taken a hostile attitude toward requiring safeguards in bilateral atomic energy agreements. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] in December 1960 that since France had been excluded from the "nuclear club," it was unreasonable to expect it to accept the obligations of a club member.

Possible Motivations

The strong current of pro-Israeli and anti-Arab sentiment in France, particularly at the time of the Suez campaign, would have favored a move backed by the military to aid Israel in an extensive nuclear energy program. The French military have long contended that in

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fighting the Algerian war, France was blocking the spread of Communism and defending NATO's flank in the Near East and North Africa against forces hostile to the West. Despite the close French-Israeli military-defense ties, however, it is unlikely that such cooperation would be possible without top political support. An agreement could have been consummated by a few top French and Israeli officials, much the same as was the French-Israeli arms deal.

The Israelis on their side have long feared that, with the aid of the Soviet bloc, the Arab states might win the Middle East arms race. The Israeli military, therefore, have always put a high priority on the acquisition of the most modern weapons. An Israeli official stated in early January that Israel could not be expected to wait until Egypt produced an atomic weapon.

It is likely, moreover, that the Israelis, whose scientific and technical capabilities are highly advanced, have exploited French aid and assistance to the fullest. The limitations are the high cost of a nuclear weapons program and the lack of an extensive industrial base.

Since, as is most likely, French-Israeli cooperation on a nuclear program was in effect when De Gaulle returned to power, the decision on his part not to terminate this policy was probably based on something more persuasive than the willingness he expressed to Mrs. Meir in

August 1958 to honor outstanding agreements. He has stated that no nation can afford to give another something for nothing. Although he apparently listened to the Quai d'Orsay's advice and for a time sought a rapprochement with Nasir for the purpose of facilitating a solution of the Algerian problem, it is unlikely he expected much to result from these attempts.

De Gaulle's willingness to forward Israel's nuclear program may have also been affected by his desires to obtain full acceptance for France in US and UK councils and a say in Western use of nuclear weapons. By advancing Israel's nuclear status he may have felt that he was building up concrete evidence that France could independently play a great-power role.

Confident that he could solve the Algerian problem, De Gaulle has tended to look ahead to advancing France's world position. A major tenet in his approach is his belief that possession of a nuclear force is paramount if France is to be given consideration as a world power. He gave top priority to production of an atomic weapon, and it is certain that in his determination to make France an atomic power he considered all possible sources of assistance. The possibility cannot be discounted that Israeli scientists in the post-Suez period may have offered French researchers new help in the current French program. (SECRET) [REDACTED]